



issue brief

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Rehabilitation Research & Training Center



Performance Management for State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies Serving Transition-Aged Youth

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This brief illustrates how state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies can use performance management tools and processes to leverage their data systems to improve their programs. VR agencies play an important role in delivering services to transition-aged youth with disabilities who are preparing to move into employment or postsecondary education. VR agencies collect, or can obtain, large amounts of data on client services and outcomes—data that can go largely underutilized. As agencies try to improve outcomes for youth clients, performance management tools can use these data to track existing outcomes and can inform program and policy changes to serve clients better. These tools are especially important, given the emphasis on performance measurement and evidence-based best practices by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and organizations like the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition.

The ultimate goals of performance management for VR agencies are to use data to help VR agency staff identify practices that are working well, change those that are not working well, and improve outcomes for clients. Performance management processes can help VR staff make evidence-based decisions to meet these goals. To explore the VR agency performance management process, we recruited staff from the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, two state VR agencies that have experience with performance management. We worked with agency staff to develop a performance management cycle and a tools framework that are applicable for any state VR agency.

This brief presents a cycle of performance management processes that can help VR staff implement evidence-based decision making. We then describe a framework to help VR staff organize priorities that they can address using performance management tools. Next, we discuss several analytic options available to VR staff to attempt to answer their research question or address their problem and highlight a new performance management tool, the VR Program Evaluation Coach, which is designed to help VR staff evaluate their programs, policies, and services. We conclude by presenting several real-life examples of how VR agencies can use new or existing data to answer pressing questions, change agency behaviors, and improve outcomes for youth clients.

Figure 1

The performance management cycle



The Performance Management Cycle

The performance management cycle is a flexible process applicable to a wide variety of program, policy, and agency settings (Figure 1). The first step in implementing performance management is to identify the problem or question that staff wish to address. Several additional steps continue the process of what is ultimately a repeating cycle where performance management informs decision making, decision making informs changes to behaviors and outcomes, and changes to behaviors and outcomes inform further performance management.

First, VR agency staff think critically about a question or a problem the agency is facing. Are the services they currently provide improving outcomes for clients? Would providing different services lead to better outcomes? How can they find out? In the rest of this brief, we explore several methods to help VR staff think about how to identify and frame their question or problem, often the most difficult step. Next, VR staff consider the data available to answer their question or solve their problem. Are the data they currently have adequate, or will they need to collect new data? Would any external data sources also be useful? Then, VR agency staff conduct the appropriate analyses to answer the question or address the problem. Staff can use a variety of analytical tools, which we will describe further. When the analyses are complete, VR staff review the findings and share them with stakeholders and others who could benefit from the information, in particular frontline VR staff such as counselors who can contextualize the findings and use them to improve their own processes. Finally, VR staff use the findings to make decisions about new or existing policies and programs, thus improving outcomes for their clients.

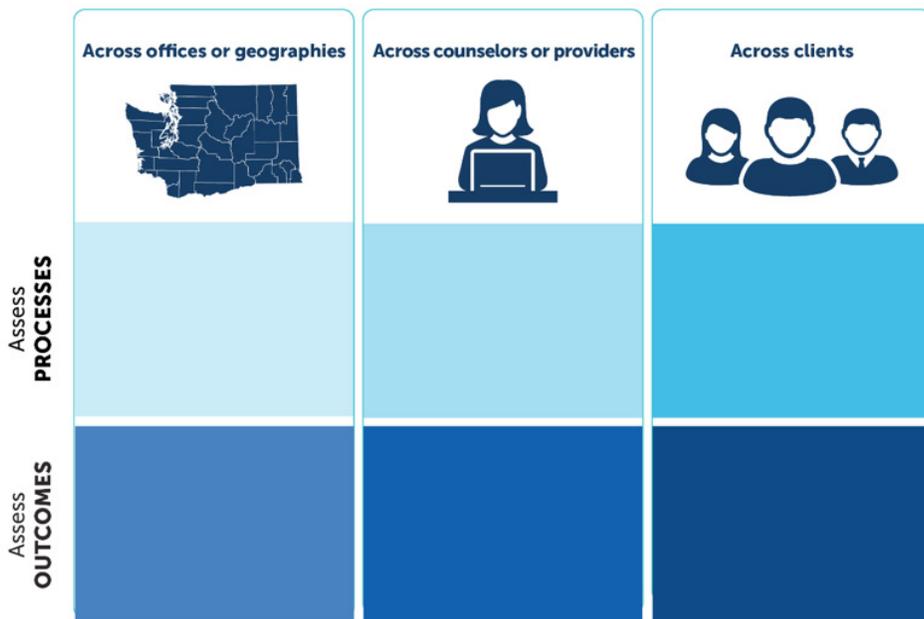
A Framework for Performance Management

As a starting point, in steps 1 and 2 of the performance management cycle, VR staff identify priorities or challenges they wish to address and assess whether they have the necessary data to measure outcomes. Input from frontline staff may be helpful in this step. However, narrowing down to a single question or problem can be difficult, as there are multiple perspectives and potential costs associated with different questions. For example, staff must take into account competing needs, such as agency priorities, scarce resources, concurrent programs and policies, and data analytics capacities.

To address this challenge, we developed a framework that can help VR agency staff organize competing priorities and assess whether they can use performance management tools to address them (Figure 2). The framework organizes priorities across two dimensions: (1) processes or outcomes (shown as rows), and (2) VR stakeholder types (shown as columns). This framework can help VR staff work through steps 1 and 2 of the performance management cycle and identify the right questions to answer when faced with decisions about what works, when, and for whom.

Figure 2

A framework for performance management



As shown in the row categories, the first step is to determine whether the question relates to a VR process (for example, considering how to better implement a new motivational interviewing training for counselors) or targets a specific outcome (for example, assessing the impact of a specific program on client employment at closure). VR research often focuses on longer-term outcomes, such as the rehabilitation rate or the type of closure. However, shorter-term processes can have a significant impact on long-term outcomes, can indicate whether a program is on track to achieve its goals, and are an important topic of research on their own. For example, VR staff may be concerned about initial client engagement—getting new clients to develop and sign an individualized plan for employment and start services—as a step toward attaining eventual long-term employment for clients, especially high school students who may be engaged with VR for several years or more before they finish school.

The column categories capture the level of analysis of the question or problem across types of VR stakeholders: VR offices or geographies (for example, counties, school districts, or regions within a state), VR staff (for example, counselors or service providers), or VR clients (for example, transition-aged youth or individuals with a specific disability). Understanding who or what the question or problem is about can help identify the best method to answer the question or fix the problem. For a question about transition-aged youth who receive services in a school setting, the most appropriate level of analysis might be the school district. For a question about the quality of services clients receive through referrals to service providers, the level of analysis is likely the provider.

Analytic Options for VR Staff

Once VR staff identify their question or problem, they must then identify the best analytic method to use to answer it (step 3 of the performance management cycle). The most appropriate tools and techniques to answer a specific research question or address a specific problem depend on a variety of factors, including where the question falls across the two dimensions of processes versus outcomes and VR stakeholders. For example, the best method to analyze regional differences in implementing a new program across VR offices is likely different from the best method to assess employment outcomes for clients with autism, or for clients served by an individual counselor. VR staff must also consider other factors, such as data availability and staff capacity to conduct the analyses. There are many potential analytic methods available, including:

- **Descriptive analysis** uses data to understand what is occurring or has occurred, such as looking at data on service provision to identify geographic differences in service delivery and outcomes.
- **Predictive analytics** uses data to predict the likelihood of a future event, such as determining what services or characteristics predict positive client outcomes.
- **Process or formative evaluation** looks at VR agencies' internal processes, structures, and decision making to try to improve efficiency.
- **Impact or outcomes evaluation** looks at the relationship between agencies' programs and policies and the long-term outcomes of their clients.
- **Rapid-cycle evaluation** can include any of the above analytic methods and is conducted relatively quickly to allow VR agency staff to use the findings to make changes to existing programs and policies in real time.

Many VR agencies will not have the in-house capacity to conduct these kind of data analytics and will look for outside sources of support. One new external source is the VR Program Evaluation Coach (www.VREvalCoach.com), an innovative online tool designed to help VR staff evaluate their services, programs, and policies. The VR Program Evaluation Coach guides users through the process of designing, conducting, and interpreting a program evaluation, including rapid-cycle evaluations. VR staff access the software through a user-friendly dashboard that organizes the program evaluation into five straightforward steps that help users gather contextual information, identify the most appropriate program evaluation design, prepare and analyze the data, and interpret the findings. A completed program evaluation results in a findings report that compiles the information input by staff into the software and helps translate the findings into action-oriented, policy-relevant decisions.

Performance Management Examples

To make the performance management framework we introduced in Figure 2 more concrete, in this section we organize examples of VR agency questions and problems and the analytic tools they can use to address them within the conceptual framework. Figure 3 shows examples of concrete ways VR agency staff can utilize performance management tools and techniques in their own work.

Figure 3

Examples of performance management practices

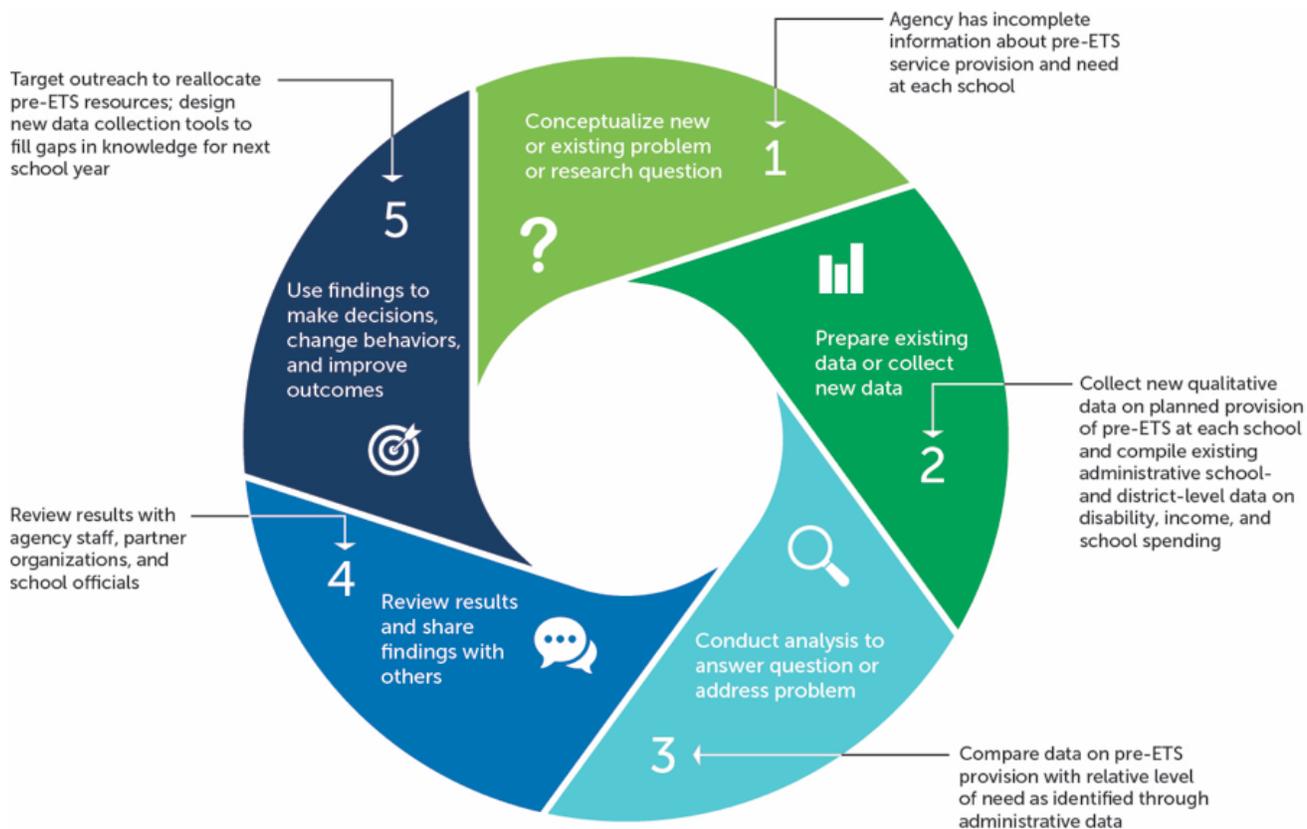
	Across offices or geographies	Across counselors or providers	Across clients
Assess PROCESSES	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile school-, district-, and county-level data from external sources to inform a school-by-school needs assessment to guide provision of resources for pre-ETS delivery. • Examine patterns of VR service delivery across offices, facilitating resource adjustment to underserved areas. 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track counselor time and resources spent on pre-ETS provision to measure progress toward meeting the WIOA-mandated 15% of federal funding spent on pre-ETS. Compare to predicted time and resource levels for each counselor and adjust counselors' caseloads accordingly. • Measure provider metrics on VR service expectations, such as average client times to receive or complete services. 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use statistical analysis to identify client and service characteristics associated with successful client progress through a career development service plan. • Use predictive analytics to identify clients at risk for poor VR engagement. • Apply rapid-cycle evaluation to test the potential for behavioral "nudges" to keep clients engaged with VR.
Assess OUTCOMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustrate cross-county differences in closure outcomes using maps, taking into account socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Use findings to assess geographic needs and determine how to best serve clients across counties. • Track skills gain of clients receiving postsecondary services by VR office. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share scorecards for job development service providers summarizing characteristics of providers' client populations, geographical service location, and metrics of job placement service success to empower clients to make informed choices in selecting providers that best meet their needs. • Provide summaries of successful closures for different types of clients (such as youth, working-aged, and SSI/SSDI clients) by counselor, helping counselors identify need for technical assistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify factors negatively associated with high school or postsecondary success, and provide additional support to clients at higher risk of negative outcomes. • Assess the types and timing of services associated with successful closure. • Compare outcomes for clients involved with an employment program to outcomes of a comparable set of clients to track the relative effectiveness of the program.

The examples in Figure 3 are a mix of activities we heard about from VR agencies, activities we have been directly involved with, and ideas of activities for the future. They show a range of analytic approaches that VR agency staff can use to address important questions or problems in their agencies.

Next, we look at a more in-depth case example of one example activity from the framework that we conducted together with a state VR agency to address agency processes across counties in the state (the top left cell in Figure 3). Under WIOA, VR agencies have been newly tasked with providing pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) to high school students with disabilities throughout the state. In Figure 4, we illustrate how one agency addressed this new priority using performance management tools. Agency staff collected and used existing external data to identify needs and planned provision of pre-ETS at each school. The cycle ends with targeted outreach to schools identified as potentially having unmet needs and a reallocation of resources, along with a revised data collection process to fill in additional gaps in their knowledge. The cycle can begin again with renewed data collection and analysis.

Figure 4

A case example using the performance management cycle



Further information

To learn more about performance management for VR agencies or to discuss your questions or ideas, contact Purvi Sevak at the Center for Studying Disability Policy, Mathematica Policy Research, 609-945-6596, psevak@mathematica-mpr.com.

About the Authors

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